

EARLY CHRISTIAN ART.

HAVING completed his review of ancient art, Mr. Wornum proceeded, on Friday week, at the School of Design, Somerset-house, to lecture on art in the middle ages—the “dark ages.”—so called, said the lecturer, because we are pretty well in the dark concerning them. This period he comprised in the interval between the establishment of Christianity and the renaissance or revival of art,—a period of about 900 years, from the fourth to the thirteenth century. He proposed, therefore, to devote to this period three lectures, including the consideration of the various styles of Gothic ornament, comprising, of course, architecture. In this first of these, however, a general historical view of the period merely was taken, and the character of its ornaments and symbols examined in detail.

Ancient art, he proceeded, might be said to have ceased when Rome ceased to be the capital of the world, namely, from the time of Constantine, in the fourth century. The establishment of Christianity, the division of the empire, and the incursions of barbarians, were the chief causes of the important revolution experienced by the imitative arts, and the serious check they received; and the foundation of Constantinople, and the Exarchate, were equally fatal to the magnificence of Rome.

Byzantium, the Rome of the East, became more rich in works of art than Rome herself: Europe and Asia were despoiled to enrich the new city of Constantine: its great thoroughfares were adorned with colossal figures in bronze; and before the church of St. Sophia alone were disposed many hundred statues, the masterpieces of ancient art.

But nearly all these works, and many more in the various capitals of Europe, Asia, and Africa, became a prey to religious fanaticism, or were carried away for the value of the metal by the many hordes of Huns, Goths, and Vandals, by whom nearly every trace of ancient grandeur was swept from the earth. The volcano, even, was a protection compared with the destructive fury of those middle-age fanatics, the iconoclasts, whether Christian or Mahomedan. So effective was their system of destruction, that but for the fortunate preservation of Pompeii, by Vesuvius, we should have had to glean our knowledge of ancient manners and customs almost entirely from books. In the third century, however, as the church became more general, and accordingly more firmly established, the antipathy and dread of images proportionately declined.

During the first and second centuries, Christian works of art were limited to symbols, and were then never applied as decorations, but as exhortation to faith and piety; such we find, for instance, on their tombstones. The first of all symbols was the monogram of Christ. It was sometimes combined with the figure of the cross, with the letters *alpha* and *omega* on the sides. Another very common symbol was the fish; it is what is called an acrostic symbol: the Greek word for fish, *ἰχθῦς*, being composed of the initial letters of the words of the following Greek sentence—*Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ*,—Jesus Christ, of God the Son, the Saviour. This is the origin of the common symbol known as the *Vesica piscis*, which is the shape of the glory that we find occasionally surrounding the whole figure of Christ, especially in representations of the transfiguration in Byzantine MSS. The five letters of the word occur as well as the fish, but in this case written vertically. Other symbols employed in early decoration were then adverted to by the lecturer, together with the pictorial and plastic representations mixed up with them in and after the third century. The most ancient figure of the Saviour depicted in the catacombs at Rome and copied by Raffaele, and others of a subsequent date, with the nimbus, or glory, introduced only in the fourth century, were then described; and the mosaics of the old Christian churches or basilicas in Rome, Ravenna, and other parts of Italy, pointed out as our principal monuments of early Christian painting. As works of art, he remarked, these latter decorations have little value, but their interest is great as historical and ecclesiastical monuments.

The basilicas, which mean literally, houses of the king, or lord, spiritual or temporal,

were originally used as halls of justice; and the upper end is called the tribune or tribunal, from the seats of the judges and magistrates, the tribunes, who held their official sittings in that part. The tribune is frequently built in the form of a large semicircular recess, surmounted by a semi-dome. The altar was sometimes placed in the recess, and sometimes before it. The whole upper concave surface (called the apsis) was gilded and adorned with figures of Christ and the apostles, variously arranged, though generally similar in the essentials, and nearly always executed in Mosaic work.

In the large basilicas in which a transept is introduced before the tribune, the ground plan thus forming what is called the Latin Cross, the transept is divided from the nave by a large arch, called the arch of triumph; and in this case subjects from the Apocalypse are frequently represented on the arch. Other subjects from the various religious cycles were introduced in other parts of the church.

These mosaics, mostly executed from the fifth to the ninth centuries, are similar in character to the illuminations of the MSS., especially those of the Byzantine school.

As regards pavements, less change, perhaps, took place than in any other class of ornamental designs; that is, the purely geometrical patterns, which, even though heathen works, could present nothing offensive to the most scrupulous Christian. We accordingly find, in many churches of the middle ages, mosaic pavements nearly identical in pattern with those lately discovered in Pompeii.

Some interesting remarks on embroideries, representations of the Divine Trinity, &c., then followed, and reference made to the “Guide to Painting,” by the monk Dionysius, recently translated and published at Paris as a manual of Christian iconography.

In the extraordinary peninsula of Mount Athos—the ‘holy mountain,’ as it is called, there are no less than 935 churches or chapels, every one of which is either covered in the interior with frescoes, or ornamented with pictures on panel, and occasionally with mosaic, and many of these works, said the lecturer, date from the early period of which we are now treating. The monasteries of Mount Athos also possess many ancient relics of the jeweller’s art, as the magnificent triptic of St. Laura, presented to that monastery by Nicophorus Phocas, in the tenth century. It is set externally with emeralds, pearls, and rubies as large as sixpences, and a double row of diamonds. The most singular peculiarity of this remarkable peninsula is, that no woman is allowed to enter it—no female has ever trod in one of its 935 chapels, and yet these chapels are decorated with the figures of female saints, by painters who perhaps never saw a woman from the time of their infancy: this is, however, of little consequence, as the images of the saints are strictly traditional. Such, continued the lecturer, is the nursery of the Byzantine school, until lately without a rival where the Greek Church prevails, and formerly of almost equal influence in the west.

A point which the educated artist ought to know, relates to the representation of the divine Father, by the hand in the attitude of benediction,—a very common symbol in early Christian art,—but differing in the Greek and Latin churches, so as at once to determine the origin of a work of art; for where the Greek form occurs, it is infallibly a sign of the Byzantine School. The Greek form represents the monogram of Christ, IC XC,—the first finger or index pointing upwards, the second slightly curved, the thumb and the third crossed, and the fourth or little finger also slightly curved. The Latin shows the thumb and the two first fingers, a symbol of the Trinity. The artist will find this distinction of frequent use in studying old monuments: it throws a light on the origin of several so-called Gothic works.

The memorable image controversy between the emperors in the east and the popes in the west, which ultimately separated the eastern and western churches, and indeed convulsed the whole of Christendom for a century and a half, commenced shortly after the Council of Constantinople, in the eighth century, deprecating symbols,—as the Council of Elberio, nearly four centuries earlier, had prohibited the decoration of churches with images. Into the par-

ticulars of this controversy the lecturer entered pretty fully, and afterwards proceeded, with the help of illustrations, to examine more in detail, the character of the ornaments, or symbols rather, of the whole of this period of art, apart altogether from its architectural arrangements. Here, said the lecturer, a new world as it were presents itself to the ornamentist, and one wholly unintelligible to him without some slight knowledge of symbolism, though much is not required, it being sufficient to point out the leading forms, and before all the cross and dome or circle; the latter, the dome or circle, referring to heaven and eternity, and the former, the cross, to the means of attaining them. These forms pervade almost every ornamental design of the middle ages, especially of the earlier periods; and they are still further developed by a host of secondary symbols, some of them already explained. In architecture too, though we cannot enter into it at present, the cross and dome supplanted every other form, and constitute the great elements of the Byzantine style, completely illustrated in St. Sophia of Constantinople, San Vitale, of Ravenna, and St. Marks, of Venice.

The symbolism of middle-age art gives its ornaments no beauty; their effect in most cases is to be attributed to the richness of their colouring and materials. But we shall find as we proceed, that in one subject at least—in geometrical design—the artists of the middle age are yet unapproached; and it is not to be overlooked that the whole range of mediæval monuments offer a vast source of suggestions to the decorator and designer, which he cannot too frequently consult, not for imitation, but for hints.

In my next, concluded the lecturer, I shall treat of some of the middle-age mosaics, and of Romanesque, Lombard, and Saracenic architecture, and their characteristic decorations.

NOTES IN THE PROVINCES.

THE colossal statue of Dr. Jephson, by P. Hollins, is to be publicly inaugurated at Leamington on 28th inst.—The new ship dock at Portsmouth, opening into the lately-finished steam-basin, has been completed by the contractor, Mr. Rolt. Its dimensions are—length on the coping, 300 feet; width, 90 feet; length at bottom of dock, 260 feet; width, 35 feet. It is capable of receiving the largest modern-built ship afloat.—A sum of 10,000*l.* has been bequeathed by a Mr. Parsons, of Dudley, for the establishment of a free school for poor boys and girls of that town and parish.—The restoration, as it is still called, of St. Michael’s Church, Gloucester, the idea of which had been abandoned, is about to be carried out by “taking down the whole of the present edifice except the tower, and erecting a new building, composed of a nave and two aisles with a chancel.” Messrs. Fulljames and Waller had prepared a plan of restoration, and made an estimate, which has been modified in cost from 3,000*l.* to 2,000*l.* The walls are to be slighter, and the aisle pillars lighter than those of the present edifice. From a re-arrangement of the seats, increased accommodation (for 50 persons) will be provided.—The corner-stone of a new Unitarian Chapel has been laid at Tipton.—The bank of the Oxford and Coventry Canal, at Rugby, lately burst and inundated the village: what was the cause we have not yet ascertained.—A small edifice, to be called St. Alban’s Church, is in course of erection by the Liverpool Church Building Society, in Bevington district. The chief stone was laid on Tuesday week. The design is by Mr. A. H. Holme, and the building is to be of rock-faced Yorkshire stone. It is to be in the Early English style, 108 feet long and 48 feet wide; height of the roof, 55 feet; spire, 120 feet in height from ground. There will be 1,000 sittings, and the cost will be 6,000*l.* Messrs. J. and R. Duckworth, G. Glaister, T. Mackerell, P. E. Weber and Co., J. Crellin, and W. Goodall, are the contractors.—The foundation-stone of the Manchester Baths and Washhouses is to be laid on Whit-Monday with all due ceremony.—Some alterations and improvements are about to be made at the Salford Townhall, from plans by Messrs. Travis and Mangnall, at a cost of about 500*l.*, according to estimates sent in.—The South Cliff